

Mark 12:28-34

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

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## **Rediscovering Connection: 'Us' & 'Them'**

Today is the second sermon in a three-part sermon series on Rediscovering Connection. Last week we began in the beginning, when God was creating the heavens and the earth. And we explored what it means that we are created in the image of a Triune God. A Creator, Parent, Father, a Redeemer, Christ, Son, and a Sustaining Breath of Life, Holy Spirit.

This Triune God whom we worship exists in perfect harmony with Godself. God is distinct but made of the same stuff. We, creatures placed in Creation are distinct, but again made of the same stuff.

The eternal Truth about our God, our universe, and ourselves is that we are interconnected, interdependent beings. We rely on one another. And how we live affects one another. Last week we began by considering God and us, and the topic of this week is "them" and us. "Them" is in quotes, of course, because if we are inextricably interconnected, then there is truly no "them."

But everything we know and experience in the world tells us otherwise, so today I would like to unpack this with the help of the gospel of Mark and his telling of Jesus' teaching of the greatest commandment. So, listen now for a word from God as it comes to us in Mark 12:28-34:

*12:28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"*

*12:29 Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;*

*12:30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'*

*12:31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*

*12:32 Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other';*

*12:33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' --this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."*

*12:34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

I want to begin by asking y'all to take a moment and honestly consider who comes to mind when I ask you who your neighbor is or who is the "them" for you. Mary Jo's sermon illustration is also perfect, so consider who is that scratchy burlap for you. And it's actually kind of nice that we are home and muted, I would encourage you to even say it out loud. Confess it, unjudgmentally. Just name it. Who is other? Who is them for you?

Where did your mind go? Did you think of people you know? Or people you don't know? What makes them other to you? Is it that they look different or have different customs or cultures? Is it that they think differently than you? Hold different values or believe different things?

There may be many people or groups of people who feel like "them," which sometimes feels like there is a certain level of animosity or conflict which is the cause the separation. They are "them" because they threaten me and mine. And while this is certainly true in many ways in our world, "them" can also be made into a "them" simply because we decide to put them there. There might not even be any conflict or a catalyzing moment. They just aren't us. They are "them."

It's actually pretty easy to put someone in the category of "them." In our society, we have an infinite number of sorting tools and an entire system which fundamentally relies on making some into "them." This is the core tenant of White Supremacy, which is our nation's founding and relentlessly guiding principle. It requires some to see others as less than. Less deserving. Less intelligent. Less capable.

It requires us, whoever is included in us, to see others as "them."

And I think fundamentally, we know that this is a lie. But because we are steeped and formed by this lie, it feels impossible to break from it. To remove all the inner thoughts and feelings and media and experiences which tell us that some people are "them." This is called inherent bias. And it's something that is formed unconsciously in every person's mind, and serves as a powerful tool to separate them and us.

And it's even deeper than that. The evolution of our species has required us to see others as "them." It was a survival mechanism. These people rely on me and I on them, if they are safe then I am safe. But those people out there, well they don't care about me and my survival, thus if they are safe, then I may be at risk.

This is deep, my friends, deep in our lizard brain. And that part of our brain is pretty hard to rewire, especially when so many of the messages we receive as new input serves to validate that we were right to keep "them" out.

How do we break free from this thinking especially when it has been and continues to be so ingrained within us? The only answer is repetition. The brain is actually pretty pliable, but new pathways of thinking and behaving only happen when we practice them over and over and over again.

New ways of thinking arise when we question and interrogate those things we have come to see as "givens." When we are willing to face the prejudice and bias that we've all been conditioned to adopt.

When we are willing to admit that we've been lied to and we've told our own share of lies, but we will not and cannot do it any longer, then new ways of thinking may arise. What opens up before us is the possibility to tell a different story, one that rooted in what is true.

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I'm currently reading a book by a woman named Valarie Kaur. She is an activist, lawyer, educator, and spiritual leader. She practices the Sikh faith, and she has recently released a book titled *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*.

This truth we are exploring about connection is fundamental to her faith, life, and is basically the thesis of her book. She says it this way,

The call to love beyond our own flesh and blood is ancient. It echoes down to us on the lips of indigenous leaders, spiritual teachers, and social reformers through the centuries. Guru Nanak called us see no stranger, Buddha to practice unending compassion, Abraham to open our tent to all, Jesus to love our neighbors, Muhammad to take in the orphan, Mirabai to love without

limit. They all expanded the circle of who counts as *one of us*, and therefore who is worthy of our care and concern.<sup>1</sup>

She is inviting us to get to a place where “We can look upon the face of anyone or anything around us and say—as a moral declaration and a spiritual, cosmological, and biological fact: *You are a part of me I do not yet know.*”<sup>2</sup>

You are a part of me I do not yet know. This is such a striking worldview, a story full of compassion and possibility. It is a story that Valarie’s grandfather taught her and one she has committed her entire life to living. She has one particular chapter on grief, in which she tells the story of her life and the life of her family and her fellow Sikhs after 9/11.

You see, Sikhs wear turbans and many of them have brown skin. And because of inherent bias and prejudice, hatred and fearmongering, anyone who looked even remotely Middle Eastern became an immediate “them” after this attack. Some folk like to talk about how unified America was after that day. How folk came together and put aside religion and race to defend America. And that is a story, one that many people told, but it is not a true story.

Valarie and many like her have told the true story of how White America doubled down on protecting itself and explicitly told anyone with brown skin, anyone who dressed differently, worshipped differently, spoke differently that they were not American. They did not belong. They were a threat to us because they were “them.”

Valarie says, that “‘Revolutionary love’ is the choice to enter into wonder and labor for *others*, for our *opponents*, and for *ourselves* in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an orientation to life that is personal and political and rooted in joy.”<sup>3</sup>

And it all must be done in community, inclusive, no holds barre kind of community. Where no one is a “them,” but only an “us” who we just don’t know yet.

“You are part of me that I just don’t know yet.”

My invitation to y’all this week is to tell a different story. See the lies for what they are and know and believe the truth about our God and ourselves: The Lord our God is one, and so are we.

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<sup>1</sup> Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger*, pg. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger*, pg. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger*, pg. xvi.

The Lord our God commands us to love God with all of our beings and to let this love grow and expand to love all creatures, to love all Creation.

To love another is to welcome and accept all of who they are. To make space for them to thrive and belong, to offer and receive. We often think that we are “us” because we like the same things or share the same worldview, but if that is how define “us,” there will always be a “them.”

Any of you who have ever been in any kind of deep relationship know that you cannot truly love someone without making space for their ideas, their needs and wants, you cannot truly love someone as yourself without making space to listen to their story and allow it to change you.

Our God calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to see all people as “us.” And in order to do that, we must commit to creating inclusive communities where one does not have to assimilate in order to become one of “us.” We are seeking unity, not uniformity. Connected not ingestion.

We are seeking to believe and live and move as though we are not “us” without “them.”

“You are a part of me that I just don’t know yet.”

Let it be true for us this day and every day. In the name of the Triune God who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. Amen.